

Rachel Johnson

Honors Thesis Statement

Oral Thesis Defense, April 10, 2015

Committee:

Sabine Gruffat
Thesis Advisor

Jeff Whetstone
Committee Member

Jina Valentine
Committee Member

The Animal's Song: music as the ocean of meaning from which the named and numbered rivers of human language have channeled and carved out words.

(Meaning is never held solely within the signifier of the word, especially when the word is intoned, or musical.)

Even more than the capacity for language, a narrative understanding of the world has traditionally been viewed as an essential part of the human experience. Through narrative, the chaos of stimuli we encounter becomes building blocks that shifting into place to build expectations and understandings that give us a sense of place, time, and identity. It is through narrative that we organize life and understand beginnings and ends. Narratives are related to the biological in that they originate in experience and observation of life; however, narratives, passed down through culture, also color how we interpret experience. Our actions, guided by cultural morals and norms, then map these guiding narratives back onto the world. In this way the loop between the narrative that is a distillation of Life and the Life that lies outside the narrative is connected through human action.

Narratives are never perfect replications of Life. Life is always fleeting from the grasp of understanding. However, as technology becomes more and more developed, the potentiality for Life that originates within human design provokes questions about the relationships between the real and the artificial. The failure of every utopia suggests that humanity is incapable of ultimate distinction from other

forms of Life. Consequently, I am interested in repositioning the understanding of human that is continuous with “other” life forms rather than the pinnacle of life. It is through this idea of continuity, based in a temporal and ultimately temporary understanding of the human that I wish to posit a sort of post-human understanding of Life as change and potentiality.

By creating an elision between animal, human, and information my work attempts to frustrate the boundaries between what is “natural” and “human” to explode human exceptionalism and create an understanding of technology rooted in biological forces and natural selection.

My generation has witnessed the emergence of the Internet- one of the most rapidly evolving features of human creation. To this day, the cyber utopianism that erupted at the onset of the World Wide Web dominates global efforts towards progress through technology. However, the history of the Internet seems to evince a an evolving system of developments whose twists and turns are subject to the base forces described by Darwinian logics. Billboards advertising such domains as “lonelyhousewife.com” spotted the interstate less than two decades after the Internet emerged as a method for communication of data between scientists whose research itself was fueled by national desire for military and scientific power. Content and imagery that uses hyper-sexualized, supernatural, monstrous and otherwise lurid anatomy (human, animal, and plant) dominates virtual spaces in

order to engage attention of users. The intensive mobilization of female sexuality as bait for garnering clicks and revenue proves the viability of sexual desire as a logic for technological evolution. At the same time, the virtuality of the Internet provides new methods of understanding corporeality. In my videos I seek to define a certain feminine aesthetic that can be seen as an outcome of the female anatomy rather than a picture of it. Post-corporeal aesthetic manifestations of feminine predate the Internet. Czech filmmaker Vera Chytilová's robotic doll-like teens whose anarchic antics unfold in episodic destruction of the political order they diagnose, as "gone bad" are not literal women. Instead the two heroines of 1966 *Sedmikrasky* are formalized mannequins of a feminine artifice who become so destructive that the filmstock itself cannot escape unbroken (the film ends as a falling chandelier crushes them and ruptures the film). My own model for developing a version of the anarchical feminine aesthetic comes from a more recent and mainstream version of allure and abandon: Russia's lesbian techno pop duo t.A.T.u. It required a real obsession with the history and aesthetic of t.A.T.u. to unearth the secret heart beating hot blood beneath the chrome mirrors of gimmick.

t.A.T.u. made international headlines as europop provocateurs in the form of two teen lesbians kissing in the rain, their high stocking knees knocking as their white blouses are doused to the bare skin. The group's runaway hit "All The Things She Said" pairs sexual awakening with anxiety: the deadly consequences of a secret and illegal lust finally splintering the surface. An impossibly high, Posthuman Lolita screams as if internally "this is not enough!" while her lover and bandmate's backing

vocals act as an accomplice to the crime of doomed and illicit passion. The duo's 2002 debut album, "200 km/h in the Wrong Lane" is like a page-turning novella penned by a hormone drunk teen girl. However given the homophobic context of Russia, the novella takes the form of a suicide note when object of obsession is another teen girl. Lolita squared.

The songs are addictive: hook laced melodramatic europop for a purgatorial rave. The girls are specifically 'underaged', pushing their voices into crystal pangs of such high registers that Lena, whose voice is t.A.T.u.'s soul, would be left hoarse forever more. The forced schoolgirl aesthetics of t.A.T.u. read immediately as pornographic, yet the voyeurism does not operate from a sexual point of view. Locked in a barbed wire fence in a schoolyard, subject to the gaze of the frowning townspeople and us, the lewd viewers, we see the girls in wide shots from above. The girls beg for mercy beneath an oppressive and inescapable panopticon of condemning eyes - institutional structure of parents, school, and government. The videos are cold--always blue green in temperature --and noisy with the videotape traces of CCTV. Even when the girls are together they never speak to each other directly. The only dialogue between the two occurs in the a phone call introduction to "Show Me Love" in which the bored and repetitive replies from an indifferent lover lead the caller to the manic cry of the songs' title. The song ends with a whispered, "Mama, Papa, forgive me..."

With each repetitive europop concoction t.A.T.u. sends out messages of desperation through the void that is this same world that dooms their yearnings to be impossible. Despite the cold and noisy aesthetic, the music is somehow ultra human in its yearning for ...Love? Safety? Connection? Utopia? The emotions are powerful and real, despite the rather obvious fact that a mastermind TV producer constructed their entire romance. Indeed the only truly bisexual singer of the pair has recently made news with homophobic statements that she would not accept a gay son, while a lesbian daughter would pass because “lesbians look aesthetically much nicer than two men holding their hands or kissing.” Her cruel harshness and utter lack of idealism dash the hopes of anyone naïve enough to take the duo for any sort of positive political role models. However, there is bitter truth to her statements considering the popularity of lipstick lesbian sexuality in mainstream media that they themselves capitalized upon. Indeed her statements only emphasize the secret purity of t.A.T.u. : radical nihilistic abjection.

Planting bombs in school bathrooms... careening into Siberian forests in a hijacked 16 wheeler that crushes the only witness... spraying the brains of a violent male hookup on the wall and escaping the bedroom in crass lingerie... t.A.T.u.'s oeuvre envisioned queerness as a the twilight zone of the social order's death drive. The damned and exiled lovers cling to the runaway train of desire where nothing else exists or matters. In 2004 queer theorist Lee Edelman posited social order and politic as reliant on the future of the child. Consequently Edelman proposes the

queer as an anti-social negative to the symbolic realm of ideals reproductive futurism produces.

t.A.T.u. is fueled by the chaos that lies outside the defensively drawn margins of the social order. t.A.T.u is a version of life itself. Life outside of laws. Life outside of hope. Life that is against life.

My film is dedicated to the impossibility of life beyond the forces that make us run, cry, hide, and fall down. My thesis is: I am Rachel Johnson I am 22 years old and I want to know what love is. How do we live now?

Love is bounded by sacrifice in the animal world as in the human. Animals in heat no longer move: you can kill them. They can kill themselves trying to hop over a fence or to exert all their resources to the art of attraction. As I have mentioned, language most likely comes from music. In "The Descent of Man" Darwin asserts that early man,

used his voice, largely as does one of the gibbon apes at the present day, in producing true musical cadences, that is in singing...this power would have been especially exerted during the courtship of the sexes, serving to express various emotions, as love, jealousy, triumph, and serving as a challenge to their rivals. The imitation by articulate sounds of musical cries might have

given rise to words expressive of various complex emotions. (*The Descent of Man*, 1:56)

Expanding upon Darwinian treatise of natural selection, Elizabeth Grosz posits the excess that is language, art, and the human as a result of a form of sexual selection. What if the exertions that drive a being to the brink of death result not in the continuation of the species, not in the reproduction of the social order, but serve ecstasy itself? In the irresistibly titled essay collection "Literature and Evil" Georges Bataille feverishly proclaims tragic classic *Wuthering Heights* the most beautiful and violent love story of all time for Brontë's understanding of pure evil. Bataille posits the erotic, not unfavorably, as the movement towards the moment when intensity increases to the point that ego is overcome through the surpassing and destruction of the self in isolation. Kathy and Heathcliff become evil when they negate life itself. By choosing to remain in the lawless irrationality of childhood, and refusing to enter society which values survival and the future above the pure and brute desires of the child, they are doomed to an evil love. When sexual reproduction becomes void is love innately more erotic?

By cross pollinating Bataille's diagnosis of Eros and Edelman's propositions for queerness against futurity I have developed an Anti-Life narrative from which to structure a collection of units of information (videos). These units- Youtube videos of deer- are documents of animals, mediated by humans. The variability of source

and context for this deer imagery makes a single reading of the units as a narrative utterly absurd. My application of the “narrative” can only be understood as an engagement with the absurdity and necessity of the narrative in the human mind despite the algorithmic tendencies of the information age. Narrative dovetails with structure: the structure of new media. I suggest that narrative remains a dominant cultural logic as long as humans retain a subjective role in the organization of information. Carolyn Bassett argues against some Postmodernist eulogies of narrative by positing narrative as a “continuous reaction to information and its discontinuity” (Bassett, 3).

How did I organize this mass of data in video form? How do my viewers organize this mass of data in video form? The receiver of the images may supplant the narrative over time, or may choose not to do so. By maintaining a certain looseness to the audio and visual tracks I rely on a coherence that more aesthetic than theoretical. In crafting my final film from the network of videos that fall under my criteria of selection, I attempt to rely on visual pleasure as a logic. The pleasure of viewing comes from this trancelike unfolding more than from a sense of narrative. However, I still found myself requiring some sort of framework for organizing the information. Seasons emerged as a framework. Upon organizing my library based on season another organization framework emerged within the seasons: reproduction. Fawns only appeared in the videos during the Spring and Summer: a chillingly beautiful reminder of Life’s entwinement with the material.

Narrative lives because it is contingent and mutable...transforming in response to the material conditions under which we live, which are themselves articulations of a social totality. (Bassett, 3)

It is Bataille, too, who has stated that “literature is the essential or nothing.” The essential is a near synonym for the “grand narrative”- that story that persists through time and cultures. The tragedy of star-crossed lovers is one of the most common in all of history. Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet... does the rejection of futurity necessarily invoke an element of tragedy that exceeds even these romantic archetypes? The star-crossed lovers gain their erotic romanticism by the very tragedy of an impossible future within the reproductive order on the terms by which society finds acceptable or ideal. The erotic romanticism within the queer love narrative implies a dimension to this tragedy that takes place within the domain of ‘nature’ itself. If Bassett is right in arguing for the mutability of narrative, I see my own applications of narrative as a structural response to the anxieties of sexual reproduction in our current age. My videos map these anxieties back onto the world that produced them by recreating primary documents from observation of nature (the deer within the videos) and technology (the videos within the Internet).

There is a certain contradiction to this traditional notion of futurity today. In our current technological age, the promise of life itself steps beyond sexual reproduction. This introduces a sense of chaos to traditional reproductive futurity

even within the dominant sociopolitical realm that insists upon maintaining human life through these technologies. How is life experienced when one is driven outside of the fantasy structures of social reality that weave nations and ideals out of chaos? My generation is beginning to comprehend the imminent destruction of the planet as we know it to the forces of global warming, nuclear terror. Yet, the apocalypse is an older narrative than the tragic lovers. Bataille is correct that each age defines these eternal questions on its own terms- both temporal and regional. Twenty two years of life in the American South comes to bear on the ways in which I model these inquiries: no matter the ideological reasons I may provide for constructing narrative through the bodies of deer, I think there is something about my experience alongside them that is inextricable with my own memory, identity and desires.

My obsession with t.A.T.u. began at a similar time as I found a video of a baby deer stuck in backyard to be maybe the most beautiful thing I've encountered on youtube. I quickly became fascinated with the contemporary phenomenon to which this video belongs. People, now constantly armed with digital recording devices, film the moment that the elusive Wild Animal enters the characteristically "manmade" space. In this moment, a liminal zone of uncertainty, danger, and beauty suddenly comes into being. These videos tell uncomfortable truths about the impossibility of quantifying anything as "natural", as the spotlight suddenly falls upon the line between the wild and the human- and the impossibility of such a line is all that can be found. These moments are rituals for understanding that there is no way to define what is "natural" and "unnatural". Nothing is untouched or separate from

the forces that we have unleashed as humans who understand time or imagine we do. The power of these moments resides within animals' status as signifiers *of* the wilderness, as symbols of nature and of the anarchical feminine aesthetic I have previously described.

The material and morphological form of the deer possess a specific and essential elegance and simplicity that humans have registered for thousands of years. The word 'deer' comes from the proto-Germanic '*deuzam*' which was the word for the wild animal in general. This earliest of names was the original marker between animal and man. The deer has often been synonymous with the concept of the wild animal. In ancient Sanskrit, the word for wild animal, *mrga* was used especially for the deer as a result of the deer's importance in the hunt. The deer holds special value to humans as an essential source of food. While the practice of deer hunting is no longer essential to human survival, the status of the deer body as food that we are willing to slaughter and consume is vital to understanding what constitutes the body of the deer today.

The deer form itself has a grace and beauty to the human eye similar to that of the horse. Yet the deer form is infinitely more vulnerable, liable to sacrifice at the hands of humans and other predators. The movements and physical form of deer, are resultant of its continual status as prey- swift, forest toned, with large eyes on both side of the head. In an expert 1978 standup set comedian Richard Pryor recreates an entire woodland based on the hunting of a deer and the mimeses of a deer's

movements as it is hunted. Pryor's vivid and immediate representation makes a punchline of the animals' wariness. His eyes are wide, every movement a static tic of trepidation characterized by that inextricable anticipation of the chase of death.

Perhaps this vulnerability and fear within the deer is related to the animals' poetic rhyme to the feminine. The form of the deer is graceful in a way that is particularly delicate, nubile and innocent (save for the antlers of the buck). The doe deer of my focus is dangerous only as a result of unstoppable force of motion that is the chase. This chase, the vector of origin for many of the most extreme and self-destructive deer videos I encountered, seems almost to illustrate Newton's law that an object in motion remains in motion- (especially when that object is surrounded by objects that are the not trees and fields around which it has learnt to maneuver)! This hysteria of the chase is a behavioral component of the deer's essence that is analogous with our conceptions of the female as pursued. I find it interesting that in videos people posted of deer running in unfamiliar human territory, they often call the deer "crazy." I will not go so far as to say that these people are applying human psychology to the deer, but it is interesting that the concept of hysteria or insanity is applied to a situation where the natural flight response of the deer has become a signifier of something gone awry.

The deer is a marker of the primordial beauty of nature, of the hunt, of the WILD especially in the US. The deer is ubiquitous, especially in this southeastern region, as a result of human activity and suburbanization. Yet the elegance and grace of the deer lends a magic trance to my every encounter with the animal. Nevermind that

these encounters are nearly daily- the sublime moment is for me, infinitely repeated.

Duration, repetition, change.

The film I have woven from these forty-odd videos of deer posted by different youtube explores our view of the animal body as or in contrast to our own and postulates the animal, the human, and the potentially the Posthuman under the biological premises of duration, repetition, and change that are tendencies shared by all forms of Life.

On one level, the film performs a simple experiment: how does the grand narrative of the tragic love story allow us to perform the task of developing discrete characters from footage of many different individual deer within the same species and gender? I employ the self-conscious draw of the narrative as a means of making sense of unrelated bits of information and providing meaning to events whether or not that meaning is arbitrary.

I am not the first person to undertake such a task. In my practice, I wish to make work that works in conjunction with the network of meaning generated by the users who post, view, and comment on content posted to Youtube. Because of the formal development of the Youtube platform, notable for its comment section and related videos, content posted on Youtube is continually subject to a form of change and reproduction that is directed by the subjective activities of each particular user. Every new viewer, commenter, liker or disliker brings variation to the original

content. Furthermore, any worldview these videos may provide is automatically calibrated to you as the platform continually diagnoses and serves to your interests by populating your feed with related videos generated by algorithms that adapt to users' choices. As we intake and outtake information we till the masses of content like worms, mapping our subjectivities back onto the world through our input as users, whose desires and interests define the importance of content in the viral process.

In performing this test of narrativization, I recall the process of anthropomorphization by which we understand animals. We seek to understand animals on human terms- as if their actions and behaviors are manifest expressions of emotions we can possess and understand. I do not purport this process as right or wrong, but rather seek to test its limits. And in doing so, explore the boundaries of the human and propose the posthuman by the utilizing things that exist beyond the body: the information and traces we leave as data. To instigate a process of viewing data- in the form of user-posted internet content- as an extension of life. Is not this data too subject to variation, generation, and regeneration... if not reproduction?

My work seeks to reflect a time in which the document is free fare for the personal and subjective assemblage of meaning. A short video can be presented on a scientific site, a religious site, a news site, a pornographic site- reframed and reconstituted again and again by the process by which content becomes viral- sharing, addition of commentary, brute editing, or simply the contextualization within a new audience.

One person shares a video of a spirited sermon in a southern Baptist church as an inspiration to faith. Another person sees this video and shares it with their network, but their inherent subjectivities automatically give the film a new meaning. By simply posting the video as a response to say- a picture of a friend- the original gains a different life. My process allows for insights into this rhizomatic functioning of networks and the unfolding relationship between the narrative and the algorithm that rules the world of data.

The story begins with a sequence that progresses in a visually explicit and precise style. This opening sequence is a direct departure from the film's loose subjective meditation and serves both a linchpin for meaning and as a destructive hammer that forces us to start from a ground zero of total shock.

A dead deer's body is slowly disemboweled and violated from obtuse angles that prevent a total understanding of the actions taking place while simultaneously a doe deer gives live birth to two twin fawns.

The carefully composed imagery creates a flattening of experience that puts the human and animal on the same realm by the emphasizing analogy between the disemboweled deer's form to the form of the sexualized human female in violent and crude display. The pelvis of the deer recalls Courbet's *L'Origine Du Monde*- an undeniable and confrontational image of female anatomy that eroticized the ambiguous violence upon the deer's corpse to a degree that even necrophilia is possible. The rhythmic motion of the deer's limp body yielding to the blade the

hunter evokes a potentially sexual rhythm. With this extreme violence upon the female body, through death and birth, the narrative both ends and begins.

The extreme imagery- a corpse being rendered, a live birth- questions the line between the human and the animal through the concept of the profane. We are invited and compelled to view the deer's body as analogous to the human female. However, tolerability of our viewing these violent processes and acts reinforces the status of the bodies AS specifically subhuman. We are forced to imagine these bodies as human, and in that moment we realize how unbearable they then would be.

At this point, the primary form of film emerges, following two baby deer from childhood onwards. These two deer- who necessarily have no name or form of identification besides the interchangeable "she." The number and identity of the deer is not important. It is possible to read the deer as two lovers, two parts of a single self, or as the original animals that were captured in the primary document. I intentionally formalize the subject to allow for simultaneous readings that represent the desire for unification with self, other, and nature.

I represent the element of narrativity (which is arguably not innate to the footage itself) as subjective stream of desire that is channeled to the viewer before reaching the recipient of the message (the deer's beloved). This is my most direct and literal insertion of subjectivity. Performing the voice of the deer I employ the Viewpoints

methodology theorized by Bogart and Landau in their technique for minimalist compositions. I construct an animal subjectivity using repeated strings of monosyllabic polysemous words. I let subtle changes of emphasis, tone, speed and order unfold as I repeat the strings across durations of time. This process allows for simultaneous and varying interpretations of the word, and consequently the image. The relationship between image and sound is loose and aesthetically based in a trancelike meditative form of cinematic pleasure. Yet the film is projectile rather than still or quiet- always in ceaseless motion.

There is the sense that deer are lent to wantonness, nihilistic actions, and spouts of seizure and mania, during which all subjectivity and free will is totally lost to the chaos of the body. In a sense her actions form a sense of reclamation of a self that seems out of her control, but this is uncertain. Her lover also takes part in these actions, even if it should be again *her* will. The doe engage in the loss of the self- that opening up and carving out that is required in the self-destructive process of love- whether the love is erotic or, as invoked by the prologue, maternal (for maternal love too is sacrificial).

When the deer falls suddenly, writhing on the floor, the deer who loves her attempts to join in this “falling down” in an attempt to maintain a sense of union between them. She partakes in a self-destructive attempt at the impossible task of closing the gap between two people, or exceeding the self through the other. The deer’s self-destructive drive towards a unity beyond the self is what Bataille recognized as the

driving desire behind the erotic. The attempt to understand another perfectly- to dissolve the boundaries of the self when the self is already a chaotic abyss is what keeps an understanding of the deer as separate entities fluid with an understanding of the self. Matter does not contain the deer even as they tethered to the material. The deer are interchangeable and yet separate and changing as the impossibility of having a discrete self, and the love for the other.

While the first four episodes are radical and experimental in form, the final video obeys the logic of a popular subculture of Internet text: "femmeslash fanfiction."

Slash

fanfiction refers to texts, created by amateur authors, that create non-canonical romantic or homosexual relationships between characters that are heterosexual or not explicitly undifferentiated in the canon (Kustritz, 1). The final fragment of my video, creates a retrospective vision of hysterical teen deer anarchy sonically accompanied by an instrumental version of the t.A.T.u. song "Not Gonna Get Us." My video mimics the style and aesthetic of the official music video by t.A.T.u., even replicating some shots directly. In this way, I link my own text to the textual body of t.A.T.u.'s oeuvre and history. In addition my video becomes linked to the slash fanfiction videos of other users, who also create queer narratives by positioning video clips against the anthemic vision of queer escape using very same t.A.T.u. song I use.

The related videos that populate the side of the screen include that original music video as well as multitudes of fanmade videos that engage in the multimedia

practice of femmeslash fanfic. The creators of these videos appropriate scenes from popular shows or films like Sailor Moon and The Lion King in order to construct queer love narratives between female characters. By creating one of these videos myself, I contextualize my own practice into this greater network of users who attempt to draw out and give birth to queer narratives that mere possibilities within existing content. t.A.T.u.'s cultural legacy continues as their songs act as a divining rod collecting the traces of a possible queer love story within existing material. I practice slash fanfiction to emphasize the fertile processes of textual production and reproduction driven by the desires of Internet users whose narratives may or may not be represented within the mainstream.

Despite the fragmented, labyrinthine structure of my video series, the veracity of energy within the entire aesthetic experience of the film becomes impossible to deny by virtue of the deer's contextualized existence in a cycle of reproduction that is the precondition of their existence itself.

WORKS CITED

Bassett, Caroline. *The Arc and the Machine: Narrative and New Media*. New York: Manchester University Press. 2007. Print.

Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*. New York: M. Boyars, 1985. Print.

Bogart, Anne, and Tina Landau. *The viewpoints book: a practical guide to viewpoints and composition*. New York St. Paul, MN: Theatre Communications Group Distributed by Consortium Book Sales and Distribution, 2005. Print.

Burnett, Joseph. "The Quietus | Features | A Quietus Interview | Love & Art: Genesis Breyer P-Orridge Interviewed." *The Quietus*. 8 Oct. 2012. Web. 27 Mar. 2015.

Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1981. Print.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2004. Print

Grosz, E. A. *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Kustritz, Andrea. "Slashing the Romance Narrative." *The Journal of American Culture* 26.3 (2003): 371-84. ASU. Web. 7 Apr. 2015.

<<http://www.asu.edu/courses/fms351vm/total-readings/fms351-L14-reading01.pdf>>.